

Battling at Galesburg: A New Wind Blows

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“A house divided against itself cannot stand.” These are but a few of Lincoln’s immortal words. His words will ring in our ears forever, constantly reminding us of his wisdom. These words reflect his fear that slavery, if it continued to divide the nation, would destroy it. In his own unique style, he shared this view as well as many others in his great senate debates with Stephen A. Douglas. These debates changed history. These debates brought into view a great man who soon became one of our nation’s greatest leaders.

The Lincoln-Douglas Debates took place in 1858. This was a crucial time for the United States of America. The Dred Scott decision had been decided by the U. S. Supreme Court. The Kansas-Nebraska Act had been enacted. Many people argued about the rights and wrongs of slavery. Both men were battling for the Illinois senatorial seat. Stephen A. Douglas was the democratic candidate. He had been in the Senate since his election in 1847. Abraham Lincoln was less known and the Republican candidate. Then, Galesburg came along. Could Lincoln put a stop to Douglas’ “winning streak”?

Each man had his past. Douglas’s accomplishments included that of helping enact the Compromise of 1850 and playing a huge role in the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. Douglas even had a place on the Senate committee on territories. You hardly ever heard a bad word about him pass someone’s lips.

Abraham Lincoln was from Springfield, Illinois. He was a successful lawyer. He was a state politician. He had been driven out of Congress for questioning the government during the Mexican War, yet not many people knew of him.

On Thursday, October 7, 1858, the Galesburg debate took place. Out of all the debate sites, it is the only location that still exists for us to see. The weather was very cruel. It was fall and it had poured rain the night before. The wind blew hard adding to the freezing temperature, chilling the bones of anyone that wandered outdoors. It was so windy they had to move the stand to the east side of the building. Legend says that the candidates had to climb through windows on the main floor of the college just to get to the platform. It is said that Lincoln replied to the shortcut with “Well, at last I have gone through college.”

Douglas engaged Lincoln’s opinion that the Declaration of Independence declares all men, including the black race, equal. He argued that Thomas Jefferson, the writer of the Declaration of Independence, had many slaves until he died. When the Declaration of Independence was created, every one of the thirteen colonies was a slaveholding colony. Each man that signed the document did not think the black race was equal for each man owned slaves and continued to hold them after the signing. Douglas asked

Now, do you believe—are you willing to have it said—that every man who signed the Declaration of Independence declared his negro his equal, and he was hypocrite enough to continue to hold him as a slave, in violation of what he believed to be divine law?

Douglas finished his speech by informing the audience that even though under the Constitution a black man cannot become a citizen and should not become a citizen, it does not mean he should be a slave. It is up to the individual states to decide for themselves the extent of the African American’s privileges.

Lincoln began his speech with the much-argued point that the black man was included in the Declaration of Independence. Lincoln said:

The entire record of the world, from the date of the Declaration of Independence up to within three years ago, may be searched in vain for one single affirmation, from one single man, that the Negro was not included in the Declaration of Independence.

Lincoln ended his speech. In the short amount of time left, could Douglas get the audience to see his way?

Douglas' reaccused Lincoln of having contrasting speeches. Douglas' final words included those of going against the Supreme Court might cause a mob action. He stepped back. The crowd bustled to the warmth of their homes. The battle was over. Who would be seen as victorious?

Lincoln and Douglas were not the only ones to disagree. The newspapers argued about the outcome of the Galesburg debate. The Republican press swore it was definitely a Lincoln victory. The *Times*, a Democratic paper, said Douglas had done very well, and the Republicans were just trying to keep Lincoln going.

One newspaper admitted that it was so windy that it was sometimes hard to hear the speakers. A Republican paper said Douglas tried to keep the crowd's attention with acts of violence and temper. More than one pro-Lincoln paper described Douglas with white foam over his lips.

Not only did the newspapers argue about who did the best, but they argued about conflicting script. When Lincoln was represented badly in the *Times*, the *Press and Tribune*, a Republican paper, accused Douglas of paying the *Times* to make Lincoln look indecent and nasty. If you look closely at both transcripts, the only thing wrong was both

papers missed a few sentences and the *Times* did not record the disturbances from the crowd.

Why do we look at these debates with such importance? Why do schools around the country study them? Lincoln came into these debates the lesser known man. He lost the senate race, but it led him on his way to the presidency. The Lincoln-Douglas Debates also changed debating forever. These debates are well known for their ability to bring together people and discuss issues of that time respectively. One of the most important reasons that these debates matter is that it changed the population's opinion on slavery, black's rights, and states' rights. Without these debates, our country would not stand as it stands today. [From Harold Holzer, (2004). *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*; Abraham Lincoln and Stephan Douglas, (1913). *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*; *Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858* at: <www.illinoiscivilwar.org> (Sept. 28, 2007); and David Zarefsky, *Lincoln, Douglas, and Slavery*.]